

Policy Implementation - Mental Health Question #21; Changes to Office of Personnel Management's Questionnaire for National Security Positions

What is this?

The Department of Defense successfully revised question number 21 (Q#21) on the Office of Personnel Management's (OPM's) Questionnaire for National Security Positions (SF-86) regarding mental and emotional health. These changes will help to reduce the stigma associated with Soldiers and Civilians seeking psychiatric health care as it relates to obtaining or maintaining a security clearance.

What has the Army done?

In 2007, Army commanders and Army inspectors general reported the negative impact Mental Health Q#21 was having on the willingness of many Soldiers to seek needed mental health treatment. In May 2007, the secretary of the Army requested the secretary of defense's personal support to eliminate the mental health question to address Soldier perceptions that seeking mental health counseling could put their careers and service at risk.

Q#21 asked: "In the last 7 yrs, have you consulted with a mental health professional or consulted with another health care provider about a mental health condition?" Soldiers perceived that if they answered "Yes" to Q#21, they could jeopardize their ability to obtain or retain a security clearance needed for job performance or continued Army service.

The Army Central Clearance Facility reported that very few clearances were denied or revoked solely on mental health issues. Less than one-quarter of one percent of denied or revoked security clearances over the last two years were based on psychological issues (average of four per year). Self-disclosure of mental -health treatment was not the deciding factor in clearance revocations and denials. In almost all cases there were unrelated concerns stemming from the clearance investigation process, which guided their judgment in rendering the adjudication denial/revocation determination.

What can Soldiers expect from the change?

All Army security managers have been advised of the change. Until such time, office of personnel management publishes the updated SF-86, security managers will advise Army personnel to use revised language below when answering Q#21 on the SF-86:

- Mental health counseling in and of itself is not a reason to revoke or deny a clearance.
- In the last 7 years, have you consulted with a health care professional regarding an emotional or mental health condition or were you hospitalized for such a condition?
- Answer "No" if the counseling was for any of the following reasons and was not court-ordered:
 - 1) strictly marital, family, grief not related to violence by you; or

2) strictly related to adjustments form service in a military combat environment.

- If you answered "Yes", indicate who conducted the treatment and/or counseling, provide the following information, and sign the Authorization for Release of Medical Information Pursuant to the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act.

Why is this important to the Army?

Our profession is exposed to traumatic and tragic events with psychological and physical impacts at a greater velocity than most other environments. Life and death decisions are made daily. Army Soldiers and Civilians are the “strength of the nation,” and their mental and physical readiness is essential to fulfilling the Army’s mission. We must protect and preserve the readiness of our leaders and Soldiers.